**Music Director Sabbatical Report**

What a gift this sabbatical was! I truly appreciated how much I needed it about a month in, when I finally felt like I’d slowed down from the pace I’d been keeping in my work life. I used my sabbatical time balanced between intensive musical experiences and reflection time to evaluate how these new experiences can add to my tool chest as well as what tools might have been neglected. I was able to evaluate what I do well and can do even better as well as areas to improve. An additional benefit was having time to consider what I’d like to do more of as a church musician and how I could make room for those. Below are the four experiences I would not have been able to do without this great opportunity of time and treasure. Thank you to the church council and Pastor Carly for encouraging this and to Janet Bednar and Doris Bryant for being the sabbatical support team. I also had the peace of mind the church’s music would be in the excellent hands of AnnLaura Tapia.

**American Choral Director’s Association Illinois Summer Retreat**

For two days in late June, choral conductors from all over Illinois convened at Illinois State University to learn new music, share stories of success and challenges and to be inspired by two highly respected clinicians. Joe Miller is the director of choral activities at Westminster Choir College and Stacey V. Gibbs is a scholar and prolific arranger of spirituals.

We sang through many of Stacey’s arrangements and he shared his process, insights into particular texts or compositional choices and also led a discussion on how choirs can successfully perform spirituals in a time where cultural appropriation is a hot-button issue. His view is that spirituals can, should and must be performed by choirs of any racial makeup. He even encouraged using dialect as it informs the tone production that will make the pieces sound more authentic. His compared the use of dialect to any other linguistic or vocal style choice we make when performing ANY piece – we should strive to teach and sing any style with care, consideration and love. I was able to speak to him personally and ask him more specific questions and his answers gave me renewed confidence in bringing music from any culture to any congregation or audience.

Joe Miller led the choir of conductors through his rehearsal process and prepared us for our final concert. His connection to text and techniques to make it clear without it sounding like a technical exercise were quite helpful. He also led a conducting master class and I was one of the selected participants. I was tasked with preparing an SAB arrangement of a Haydn Mass excerpt, conducting the mass choir and then Dr. Miller critiqued my work and gave suggestions for improvement. It was a challenging experience, but well worth it.

**Sacred Music Experiences in England**

Going to England to hear some of world’s great choirs in magnificent churches and venues will not soon be forgotten. I’d been to England in college on a choir tour, getting to sing in many of the great cathedrals. However, getting to be in the audience or congregation was a refreshing change of pace.

In college St. Paul’s Cathedral in London moved me with its awe-inspiring architecture and acoustic (and still does). However, now it actually spoke to me as a worshipping church despite its draw for massive numbers of tourists. I attended a Sunday service where the choir performed a Mozart mass with orchestra. Amazing, and yet, it was only part of the larger worship experience. I also attended evensong and an organ recital there and both were stunningly beautiful.

I also attended evensong at St. Martin in the Fields, St. Bartholomew the Great, All Saints Margaret Street and Westminster Abbey. I wanted to immerse myself in the traditional structure for evensong so that I could build from that for a worship experience at our church. It was interesting to see how each congregation made guests feel welcomed (or didn’t). High marks to St. Martin in the Fields, All Saints Margaret Street and St. Paul’s Cathedral. Westminster Abbey’s ushering staff is a model of efficiency and firmness, moving thousands of worshippers in and out and helping maintain a respectful atmosphere for those of us who were really interested in hearing the choir and the message. A welcome surprise was the service also included a ceremony for departing (graduating) choristers. The dean recognized the boys and the families were sitting in the front, some emotional as their sons would be moving on. I also had an unexpected moment of pause walking past the graves of composers Britten, Elgar and Purcell and scientist Stephen Hawking.

The second Sunday I attended the service at Union Chapel which I was drawn to because of its progressive theology and that the sanctuary also served as a frequently used venue space for bands, comedians and other performances. Seeing how they made the space work for worship and amplified concerts was highly informative. The congregation was very small in number, but the pastor, pianist, lead singer and our few but mighty had a wonderful morning.

Knowing that evensong and church services could happen anytime, the timing of the London trip was built around English National Opera’s production of Benjamin Britten’s Noye’s Fludde. I saw two performances of this and took copious notes to see how it might be adapted for our community some day.

Lastly, I was inspired by the choir Vox Luminis, a Belgian ensemble specializing in Baroque music. They presented a concert at Wigmore Hall of Bach motets and I was in heaven. Between their artistry and the most stunningly good acoustics I’ve encountered it was an evening to cherish.

In the middle of the week I took to the train to York to go to evensong in the cathedral and then come back for an evening concert given by the Sixteen, a phenomenal choir singing sacred music from the last 400 years. York also has a fabulous train museum!

**Sing Your Faith in Lincoln, NE**

Composer and church music director Tom Trenney led this retreat at his church, First Plymouth Congregational. I first encountered Tom’s work at an ACDA convention in Minneapolis a few years ago and ordered one of his anthems, “For Everyone Born” almost immediately. It quickly became one of our choir’s favorites. I knew getting to actually work with him and see how he conducts rehearsals would be great. What came as an additional bonus was how refreshed as a person I was after the weekend retreat. He has an affinity for Mr. Rogers and how that method of quiet support and care can really help people. He balances his rehearsals with high expectations and pursuit of meaning in the music in a way I hadn’t experienced in a long time. The professional ensemble that helps lead the larger choir gave a compline service the first evening. Beautiful music, candle-lit sanctuary – a very nice way to close an evening.

**New Explorative Oratorio in Los Angeles**

This festivalwas hosted at First Congregational Church of Los Angeles and led by its music director David Harris and spouse Laurel Irene who are the co-founders of Voice Science Works. The draw was that composers and singers would work together to perform a brand new work titled the “Exploratorio.” The composers were tasked with composing a movement based on creation or creativity. Some set a creation story while others looked at creative process and how that could be shown through music. Besides rehearsing these pieces, a good deal of time was spent improvising, learning about the physics of sound production, how we can use that as singers in a range of styles, and how to use extended vocal techniques such as overtone singing, polyphonic singing and ingressive singing. While I haven’t mastered them yet, it was certainly fun to use the voice in new ways in a supportive environment surrounded by other eager musicians.

We also heard a concert given by Los Angeles a cappella ensembles singing brand new music. Festival participants led a “do-it-yourself” Haydn Creation midweek which was a great contrast to the performance art aspects of the final performance of the “Exploratorio.” We also were the choir for the church services on 8/4 and 8/11. I loved seeing how modern music was used and received in a church service.

This was my favorite week because, in addition to learning and growing, there was time to make deep connections with people both as performers and friends.